

Fiddle Tablature

Traditionally, the Fiddle does not use tablature like the Guitar, Banjo, Mandolin and Dobro. However, there is a way to incorporate tablature in Fiddle music.

Fiddle Tablature ('Tab', for short) looks a lot like Mandolin Tablature (4 lines representing the 4 string pairs), with the exception that, instead of the numbers representing the frets, the numbers represent the LEFT HAND FINGERS on the Fiddle. That really makes it very simple for someone that can not read regular music notation.

Position Markers

Most violin teachers place three (or more) small pieces of slender tape across the fingerboard of a first year student. These indicate where to place the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers on the fingerboard. I used tapes for many years with my students but, I found that they slide around a lot and, in time, create a sticky mess on the fingerboard. I experimented a little bit and found placing small white dots of liquid paper or any other correction fluid on the fingerboard at the same positions. If the dots start to fade, I just put another dot on it!

If you are going to do this or use tape, these are the positions to place the markers on a FULL SIZE VIOLIN:

- 1st marker should be $1 \frac{7}{16}$ inch (36 mm) from the nut (where the strings start to vibrate at the peg head)
- 2nd marker should be $2 \frac{21}{32}$ inch (68 mm) from the nut.
- 3rd marker should be $3 \frac{1}{4}$ inches (82 mm) from the nut.
- 4th marker (If you decide to add a marker for the 4th finger) will be $4 \frac{1}{4}$ inches (108 mm) from the nut.

These measurements are for a full size violin. If you have a smaller fiddle, say, a 3/4 or smaller, these marker positions will not work. They will be too far apart.

If you have a smaller fiddle, there is a formula called the 'Rule of 18' that will help you find your marks. It involves successively dividing the scale length (the distance between the bridge to the nut) minus the offset to the previous fret by 18. Below is an explanation of how this formula works:

1. With the instrument in tune and your bridge in the proper place (normally the bridge should have it's feet in line with the notches in the F holes), measure the length of the strings from the bridge to the nut. This is called the 'scale length'.
2. Divide this number by 17.817. If, for example, your scale length on your 'small' fiddle is 12 inches, you would divide $12 / 17.817 = .673$

3. The first fret on your smaller fiddle would be .673 inches from the nut. However, **THIS IS NOT** WHERE YOU WANT TO PUT THE FIRST FINGER POSITION MARKER. The first finger position mark will be on the 'SECOND FRET'.

4. Now, measure the distance from the bridge to this new 'first fret' position mark. Then, divide that length by 17.817 again. This new number will be the distance from the first fret to the new second fret. **THIS is where you want to place the first position mark on your fiddle.**

5. Again, measure the distance from the 'second fret' to the bridge then divide this by 17.817. This number is the distance in inches from the 'second fret' to the new third fret.

Is this starting to make a little sense?

Now, for Fiddle Tablature, you will need 4 position marks. The first finger mark will be the 'second fret', the 2nd finger mark will be the 'fourth fret', the 3rd finger mark will be the 'fifth fret' and the fourth fret mark will be the 'seventh fret'.

You may be wondering, 'Do I really need to be this accurate for my position marks?' Actually, no. This formula is used by luthiers when constructing fretted instruments. What you are interested in is a close approximation of where the finger markers should be. Remember, the Fiddle has unique playing techniques, like 'vibrato' and 'slides' that don't recognize 'frets'.

If you have trouble with math (2+2=5 kind of thing) there is a faster and easier way to find your finger positions on your fiddle: buy yourself a good chromatic instrument tuner. Get your Fiddle in tune, then, pluck the D string with your first finger in its 'approximate' position. This first finger note is an 'E'. Simply watch your tuner as you move your finger back and forth to find the 'E' note. When you do, put a mark there! Then do the same with the second finger 'F#', then third finger 'G'. Finally the fourth finger will be 'A' and you will have them all.

I wanted to show you the mathematical way to find the markers first so you will have that as an option. If you do decided to use the mathematical formula to find your finger positions, use the tuner to check your accuracy.

How to read Fiddle Tablature

My Fiddle Tablature uses 4 lines, each line will represent one of the Fiddle strings. The top line of the Tab will be your high E string. The line below that, the second line will be the A string, then the D string will be represented by the 3rd line and finally the bottom, fourth line will be the G string. The numbers on these lines represent the LEFT HAND FINGERS. This is different from the tablatures used on the other fretted instruments. The numbers on those tabs are the FRETS. So, don't get confused.

The main problem with Fiddle Tablature is that it is a little tricky to indicate the sharps and flats in a song. To illustrate these, I will use an 'L' and an 'H' for the 'Low' and 'High' fingers. For example, if you see a '2' on the second line, this would be a normal 2nd finger on the A string; a C# note. But sometimes you may need to play the regular C note that is between the 1st and 2nd finger position markers. So, in the tablature, I will indicate this adjustment with an 'L' below the 2 meaning, 'low 2'. If there is an 'H' below, say, the 3, this would be a 'High 3'. That is, the third finger will be placed just between the 3rd and 4th position markers.

To illustrate, look at the Fiddle Tablature for the song, 'Happy Birthday'. Everything is regular except for the 'Low 2' at measure 8. These are the two notes with the 'L' above them. The rest of the Tablature will be similar to standard music notation with Slurs, Bow Markings, etc.

All of the Fiddle music at www.jaybuckey.com includes Fiddle Tablature and is similar in appearance to this version of 'Happy Birthday'. Of course, the arrangements can become complicated with more notes and other symbols. These are explained in my books. However, this brief tutorial will give you a good foundation on understanding Fiddle Tablature.

